

Ancestry and Its Influence: The Family of Charlene Blackledge

Introduction

Charlene Blackledge was born in May 1997 to a loving, upper-middle class family in Albuquerque, New Mexico. As of February 2017, I am now in young adulthood and currently receiving financially-supported higher education, participating in social justice activism, and living in the same home I grew up in. Previously, my education has been in public schools and a computer-based charter school, I participated in many writing- and English-centered events/activities, and I developed an interest in creative endeavors. Education has played perhaps the largest role in my life at this point, as I've generally followed the traditional expected life plan for my age and generation (attending school every year from kindergarten to college graduation; though I slightly deviated when I dropped out of high school in 11th grade and took the GED, starting college full-time a year before my peers). I grew up with undiagnosed ADHD and have struggled with mental illness, but have generally been able to become relatively successful and healthy. Looking at my life so far, I can say that my genetics have left me with certain advantages and disadvantages, but it is also quite clear that most of my experiences are very social in nature. As such, my experiences can be better understood in the context of my ancestors, who all left their mark through the generations in one way or another. To better analyze how I am influenced by those who lived before me, I will examine, case by case, my family history, critical past experiences, traditions I have observed, and relevant institutions.

Family History

Before continuing, it is prudent to mention that I was raised by my biological parents with my brother, and have had relatively little interaction with my other close or extended family members during most of my life. This suggests that while these other family members likely have exerted some influence on me, my parents can be attributed with most of my early socialization, and so played a significant role in who I am today. As such, I will delve more deeply into the history of my immediate parents and how it has impacted me, before then covering the influences of my more distant ancestors.

My mother is Tricia Blackledge, a white woman born into the Frisbie family in 1956 Oklahoma as the youngest of three daughters. She had a rough time growing up, likely due in part to the trauma of being sexually molested as a

child over the course of nine years. She also gained a permanent knee injury in high school gymnastics, grew up in a hostile home environment, and experienced significant stressors as a teenager. In one example of these teenage stressors, she faced harassment and threats from schoolmates while she was dating an African-American boy. Later in life, she was married to an abusive husband for many years before she found my father. The hardships she experienced in her early life left her with persistent mental health problems, and yet also seem to have helped her develop a social consciousness and health consciousness that appears to not be shared by her sisters. This consciousness has been passed on to myself, through both direct stories she shared and indirect behavior I likely picked up on as a child. While still in high school, my mother took a professional interest in health and received nurse's aid training. This contributed to her first going to college and doing work in drawing/processing blood. While married to her first husband, she moved to Albuquerque and returned to college to become an elementary school teacher. Albuquerque was also where she met my dad, David Blackledge, through the pre-Internet dial-up service of a BBS (bulletin board system), and soon after was empowered by him (and other BBS friends) to escape her abusive household. They married in 1996, and I was born a year later. One of the most significant events that still affects her today was an accident in 2000, where a slip on the ice left her with a moderate traumatic brain injury. This accident lost her a beloved teaching job, yet also opened the door for her to be a stay-at-home mom for myself and my brother. Her experiences with disability also contributed to my awareness of those issues, and so have contributed to my current career focus in disability activism.

My father is David Blackledge, a white man born in 1974 Virginia as the youngest of two sons. His family moved often for his father's military job, including to New Mexico when he was 5 years old (where he has lived thereafter). Compared to my mother's experiences, he grew up very safely and uncomplicatedly. He lived in a relatively secure neighborhood, attended public school with the same circle of friends up through high school, and was in the gifted program. His dad had a stable job working at the Air Force and then Sandia National Laboratories (SNL), while his mom stayed at home until she started up businesses while he was in middle/high school. He was involved in many sports as a kid, until his focus shifted to more mathematic pursuits. The attitude related to this shift likely contributed to my own preference for academic-focused extracurricular activities over athletic ones. In high school, he did computer work at Applied Technology Consultants and then SNL, and participated in computer and math competitions. These experiences played an influential role in his following higher education pursuits, where he eventually received a Master's degree in Computer Science. While earning his B.S., he

dated my mom long-distance and frequently interacted with her using an early email system that allowed those in the education system (she was a first-grade teacher and he was a university student) to freely communicate. The fact that both of my parents were so highly involved in computers likely contributes to the importance I hold for computer literacy and touch-typing skills. My parents married while my father was finishing earning his B.S. degree, and then he attended graduate school while I was a baby. He took a proper internship at SNL, and with that plus how his own father was a manager there, he was offered a full-time job straight out of college. He has since retained a stable, well-paying position at SNL, turning down opportunities that would have forced our family to move. With that, our family has kept a stable, upper-middle class status, and so I have grown up with the privileges that entails (e.g. removed from money-related stressors). My father also developed a financial consciousness, which has promoted my own financial consciousness that will likely help me to avoid future financial problems that could interfere with maintaining my social class status.

As illustrated in these short biographies, my parents' lives have played a noteworthy role in my own experiences and sense of self. Yet it is also true that they became who *they* were courtesy of my more-distant ancestors. Some of this history I can trace, which can be attributed to both sides of my family being racially white in a country where white people historically have better records. Additionally, I have enormously benefited from the actions of my paternal grandfather, Michael Blackledge, who worked with two others over many years to trace back the genealogy of the Blackledge family. In their book, *Blackledges of America*, I can clearly identify and analyze the ancestors whose lives have helped to shape my own. I have not been as lucky for my mother's side of the family, and rely primarily on her recollection of what she has been personally told about her family history in order to get a better sense of that side of my ancestry. However, I believe she is a relatively reliable source since she is experienced with telling stories about herself and her family, and so she has maintained stronger memories than she might have had without so frequently mentally refreshing them.

I can firmly trace my ancestry along the male Blackledge family tree to my eighth great-grandfather, William Blackledge, who most likely first immigrated from England to Philadelphia County, PA in 1682. My distant settler ancestors were key to my life in modern American society, both in terms of living in this geographic location (USA) and in terms of developing this society. As I am focused on studying society and participating in activism, it is relevant to examine exactly how my family may have contributed to social injustices. My early ancestors were Quakers, and lived in the North until more recent generations when they became involved in the military and subsequently

moved around the country. That they were Quakers in the North suggests that the Blackledges likely were not slave-owners. I cannot be as confident for the Frisbies since (1) I lack more comprehensive information one way or the other, and (2) they were a First Family of Virginia, a state historically involved in slave-ownership. Additionally, by referencing *Blackledges of America* and geographic placement in history, I have deduced that the Blackledges contributed to forcing the indigenous Umani-speakers of the Delaware Tribe from their land (Thomas Sr. Blackledge, my seventh great-grandfather, lived in the area of those peoples and there is a document with his name discussing attacks by local American Indians). These discoveries tell me that my family may not have been involved in actively promoting slavery and so the initial causes of modern African-American oppression, but they did more actively participate in the historical trauma of American Indians and indigenous oppression (even if early Quakers historically made an attempt at reparation by paying American Indians for the Pennsylvania land). I have not found evidence that the Blackledges participated in active resistance to any form of racial oppression. If I interpret this as the Blackledges have *not* participated in any resistance, then it would set a precedent in my family to respond to racial issues with passiveness and acceptance of the status quo. This then explains and reflects a characteristic of passiveness that I can observe in the paternal side of my family to this day. This is relevant as passiveness has historically facilitated the creation of the white privilege that I benefit from today. (Notably, I have not inherited this passiveness characteristic, and it can be inferred that a combination of the influence of my mother's exposure to overt racism as a teenager and my own experiences in activism and the social sciences have made me more racially consciousness.)

Beyond the historical roots of oppression and privilege that affect me today, my more distant ancestors have influenced my life in more unique patterns, such as creating my financial security and affecting my lifestyle choices. To examine this more deeply, I will deviate from discussing general familial history to focus on specific events, traditions, and institutions.

Critical Past Experiences

There is an interesting relationship between my ancestors (particularly the male Blackledge line) and the Great Depression, as in how significantly *little* it affected my family. My paternal ancestor living in that time had and retained a very stable military career, which meant he had job security and earned a steady wage while the economy collapsed. This financial stability undoubtedly gave the family access to many resources that would promote good future outcomes, such as for health and education. Were this not the case, it is very possible that I would not have grown up with the stability I did. The job security of my ancestor promoted the successful careers of his descendants, with that resulting stability and social capital affecting each of my ancestors, to my father and *his* career. I and my brother have the luxury of accessing resources which will promote our own

future careers, particularly evidenced by my current ability to afford college courses not covered by my scholarship without hurting my family's lifestyle.

The Great Depression had somewhat more impact on my mother's side of the family, but was still relatively minimal in its overall impact compared to the experiences of other families during this time. My maternal grandmother was put into an orphanage with her many siblings in response to the financial burden of the Great Depression, and eventually was taken into the care of her aunts to live on a farm in a small Indiana town. While she unfortunately did not live in a loving household or town (because of a persistent rumor that she was one of the aunts' illegitimate child), the experience as a farmhand was beneficial for her health. She and her aunts grew enough food to eat and sell, and food being a staple meant that they were never out of business. My maternal grandfather similarly appeared to be unaffected by the Great Depression, as my mother noticed his lack of discussion regarding difficult times in that period. It was likely because of his stable job as a chemical plant/oil refinery insurance inspector, which may not have made him especially wealthy but kept him from financially suffering like many others were. With all that, it certainly seems that both sides of my family had a strong security net that was important to their successful development, and thus helped promote my own wellness.

While the Great Depression is straightforward to analyze, I also believe a recent critical past experience will show to be very influential in my family: The Digital Revolution. My family appears to have been among the pioneering consumers and producers that promoted the growth of the Internet and computerized technology, and that influence will likely become more apparent in years to come. My parents have strongly participated in these recent technological advancements, as evidenced by my father's education and career in computers, my mother's experiences in promoting and tutoring fellow teachers to bring computers into the classroom, and how early Internet technology allowed them to connect and maintain a relationship. Additionally, it is noteworthy that my paternal grandfather similarly worked in computerized technology at SNL, and now my younger brother has studied programming on his own time and appears interested in working in computer science. While it is difficult to objectively analyze how this historical event has shaped my family, it has already clearly promoted our relationships and is affecting our career choices. As such, I believe it is worth paying attention to the influence of this historical event as history progresses.

Traditions

While it is typical for one's ancestry to influence someone's life through their established traditions, I have noticed that identifying traditions has been difficult for me to discern. This is because, beyond the usual modern consumerist traditions that are practiced by white American families (Thanksgiving, material inheritance, etc.), there seems to be little unique symbolic behavior that existed prior to my birth. With that, I have interpreted a few social values which have grown to behave as traditions,

since they have shaped outcomes found in both sides of my family. The first of these is how my ancestors have historically adhered to traditional **gender roles**. On each side of my family, recent male family members have been involved in the military where the women have not. While this is generally understandable due to sexist legal restrictions, I also noticed that the women did not appear to follow the paths of some others and take on factory jobs or related masculine jobs that may have stunted the relevance of traditional gender roles in our family. It is also likely that the men's participation in highly-masculinized careers helped to create a patriarchal attitude that helped sustain a traditional gender hierarchy in their relationships. The women in my family did have access to education that others of their time might have lacked due to gendered expectations, but they noticeably often pursued careers considered more socially acceptable for their gender (nursing, secretarial work, elementary school teaching, etc.), and have developed homemaking skills that I have not observed in their husbands. It would be remiss of me to suggest this is a universal trend, as my father has learned some homemaking skills like cooking to help my mother, and my paternal grandmother held the masculine position of a business owner for many years while selling antiques. Beyond such divergences like those, however, Western gender roles have clearly been starkly relevant in my family's behavior. I break some gendered expectations in my behavior, both on purpose and simply by lacking affinity for appearances and homemaking skills. Yet I also know that I still am influenced by traditional gender roles when I feel a need to start learning homemaking skills so I am prepared for when I get married, when I assume I will be married and have children despite my current reluctance to pursue either, or when I find myself automatically expecting others to adhere to occupational gender roles. My awareness and purposeful action to counteract the social gender may make this tradition less influential in the future, but it may also be maintained in the expectations I hold in others.

A somewhat related tradition of expectations that has been relevant to my family history is that of **sexual abstinence until marriage**. On my paternal side, William and Elizabeth Blackledge (my fifth great-grandparents) were documented to have been condemned by the Quaker community for being discovered to have had premarital sex. They were exonerated three years later, but it is likely that this event reinforced an attitude of favoring chastity through the generations (though this is difficult to discern exactly given the lack of explicitly-relevant records beyond this one instance). On my maternal side, the traditional values of virginity can be especially noted in my grandmother's life experiences. As a child, she was accused of being the illegitimate child of one of the aunts she lived with, and experienced the related antagonism of that stigma. Additionally, my mother explained that her parents said they were married on New Year's, yet observed that they never celebrated their anniversary. Then through my research, I discovered their wedding announcement, which declares their wedding to have occurred in April. Coupled with my eldest maternal aunt's date of birth being in October, this shows that my maternal grandparents intentionally lied to their children in order to preserve the ideals of sexual virginity until marriage. This appears to be a value that my mother and her sisters did not actually adhere to (though I believe this is related to unresolved trauma

from a family friend who was a sexual molester). My mother noted that my maternal grandmother was very emotionally affected by her children not inheriting this value and so may have blamed herself (due to her religious beliefs that the sins of the parent were put upon the sins of the children), possibly evidenced by her alcoholism for a large part of her later life. It is prudent to mention that while this has been a tradition upheld for quite a while in my family, it may be diminishing in relevance due in large part to modern ideals of sexual freedom. Instead, this tradition may be transforming more into a modern societal value of sexual *selectiveness* that does not necessarily mean abstinence until marriage, which may have its own effects on my family in the future.

Looking through the direct male generations of the Blackledges, I have observed an interesting relationship with **religion** that is inconsistent with my family's usual adherence to societal standards. Early Blackledges appear to have been devout Quakers, up until Samuel Blackledge of the early 1800s (my fourth great grandfather) who was disowned in 1821 "for marrying contrary to the Friends discipline (pg. 227)." Afterwards, my direct ancestors' biographies in *Blackledges of America* noticeably have no mention of religion except for an offhand mention of my grandfather's Episcopalian christening at 13 years old. Additionally, my father explained that my grandfather was raised Catholic, but then rejected the religion after being told he was consuming the *actual* body and blood of Christ when he understood the act to be just symbolic. This suggests religion did become relevant again in the family, but dropped off more significantly with my grandfather. My father recounts that he was raised very areligiously, to the point where he was completely unfamiliar with churches before he visited one with a friend. I similarly notice that I do not place a lot of value on religion. However, I also know that I had a Jewish upbringing during childhood and that it was quite significant for that part of my life, clearly setting me apart from my recent paternal ancestors. This may be a result of my maternal family, who have a somewhat different relationship with religion.

The Frisbie family is considerably more devout than my paternal side, and place more importance on religion. Yet this value seems to include a caveat for an ideal that there is not only a single religious path worth taking. My grandmother was raised Catholic and her husband was Episcopalian, and the latter's religion was used as the framework for raising my mother and her siblings. Now, my eldest aunt has remained in the Episcopal church, my middle aunt attends the Church of Christ with her preacher husband, and my mother generally left organized religion to pursue a more personal form of spiritual fulfillment. The exception for my mother was when she wanted to give my brother and I a religious upbringing (we were baptized in the Church of Christ as infants, and then converted to Judaism as young children). With the influence from both sides of my family, I have grown to understand and respect religion, but have mixed personal interest and do not consider it a priority. In practical terms, I participate in simple Judaism practices (such as striving for a kosher diet and occasionally engaging in morning prayer), but I do not adhere to a formal belief system or participate in more formal Judaism practices (such as attending synagogue or observing religious holidays when personally inconvenient). I have observed similar behavior towards religion in my brother, though I am not fully aware of his thoughts

on the subject. It is interesting to observe how traditions related to religion in my family have a very non-linear pattern, and seem to rely on a somewhat-agnostic value that spiritual fulfillment can be flexible. This contrasts with gendered and sexual expectations in my family, which only recently seem to deviate from traditional values to more modern ideals.

Institutions

The institution of **education** has been enormously important on both sides of my family. This includes my paternal ancestors, where the last three generations of family members (both men and women) have received higher education, and often received graduate degrees as well. This seems to be linked in part to my great-great-grandfather, Lewis (H.) Blackledge, who did not attend higher education but was advanced enough in high school to receive extra training under a law firm. This training allowed him to become a lawyer soon after high school, and later in life to become an elected judge. Lewis's education and following career seems to have established the importance of education in the Blackledge family through the following generations. I also hypothesize that this importance of education contributed to my paternal ancestors' decisions of who to marry, which helped to secure the economic privileges that my family has maintained.

The maternal side of my family similarly shows great relevance of the educational institution, for women as well as men. My grandmother received higher education (without earning a degree, but with enough experience to work as a physician's assistant), and my grandfather received a degree in chemical engineering. My mother then attended higher education colleges multiple times, not giving up despite some setbacks, and earned a graduate degree in education. The individual in the Frisbie side of my family who did not pursue higher education, my eldest aunt, has apparently appeared resentful of that fact. This suggests an emotional tie to formal education, and shows the bond my maternal side has with the educational institution.

Beyond the influence of receiving education from the education institution, many in my recent family history have also been teachers of some sort. This helps to tie further importance and closeness to this institution. With all that, it is of no surprise that I was expected to attend higher education and that my identity has always felt strongly tied to the importance of academic success. My brother and I were tested gifted as children, likely as a result of both this deep relationship with education and my mother's experience as a teacher allowing her recognize giftedness. I even recall a story my mother told about how, as a toddler, I was only successfully potty-trained after my parents threatened to not let me go to preschool. While generally positive, this emphasis on education likely contributed to not recognizing the symptoms of

my learning disability until I was an adult—my failures to complete assignments on time may have been more easily attributed to boredom because I was “too smart for the material” than this more complicated barrier to educational achievement. Overall, this relationship with the educational institution has very significantly impacted my life. It explains how I have benefited from privileges that come from the experiences of my formally educated ancestors, and how the stage was set for my own economic empowerment and personal motivational factors.

Another major institution that played a role in my family is the **military**. The recent members of the Blackledge family have consistently included at least one man who went into military service, often without being drafted first. I have personally observed a very heavy emotional emphasis on military service, similar to that for education. One example can be found in the writing choices for *Blackledges of America*, where after it is stated that my ancestor Thomas Sr. Blackledge refused to take part in the American Revolution, the authors included the word “but” and emphasized that he was listed as having given patriotic service for paying taxes for non-service. My mother’s side of my family also have had men who went into service, but there seems to be less emphasis placed on it compared to my father’s side (although I lack adequate information to be completely certain). My maternal grandfather did apparently enter the military force (by lying about his age) and participated in WWII and the Korean War. He was stationed as a Marine drill sergeant in California, which was where my maternal aunts were born. This shows how military participation contributed to the formation of my maternal relatives. The fact that they were still not emotionally influenced by military service is likely because my mother’s nuclear family turned out to be mostly women, and women were not drafted nor could enter combat positions (rendering the emphasis irrelevant).

It is likely that the ancestral participation in military service has contributed to the observed values of nationalism on each side of my family, as the institution demands the sort of loyalty which can promote those attitudes. What is interesting, however, is that my parents have not developed these attitudes (nor have I). This seems to illustrate the greater importance of the choices made by immediate and present family members (compared to earlier ancestors) when it comes to developing people’s attitudes. My father did not pursue a military career like his own father or brother, and instead focused on a career in computers (which his father’s second job was also focused on). This, therefore, could be what decreased the likelihood that he developed the nationalist attitudes that other men in his family maintained. My mother, as mentioned, had little experience with military service, with having grown up among mostly women and being born after the end of the Korean War. There appears to be more nationalistic attitudes in at least one of my aunts, which may be an influence from her chosen family rather than those she grew up with. With the lessened influence of the military, the attitudes of my parents seem to generally follow a more moderate patriotism that does not extend to nationalism. My own attitude to my country actually tends to focus more on the flaws of society than the strengths (which patriotic ideals would prefer), likely contributed to by my mother’s development of social consciousness after personally encountering prejudice regarding racial and gender lines. All this considered, it is the military institution which helped give my

ancestors privileges I benefit from, and it is my parents' choices moving from the military's associated attitudes which shaped my current attitudes and behavior.

Conclusion

This ancestry assignment has allowed me to learn many revealing things about my heritage and its link to who I am now, even more than I had previously expected. It is now clear why I value education above all else, and how exactly my family gained the financial stability we have. It is also satisfying to know a small part about how my ancestors directly contributed to the history that gives me my white privilege today, and I feel more confident about using this understanding of white privilege to educate others on racial topics. This assignment also demonstrates how ancestry is very influential for external factors of a person's life (like geography, education, social status, etc.), but is clearly *not* so strongly tied to a person's ideology. I have experienced the subtle influence of the values passed between generations, but it is considerably weaker than the influence of mine and my parents' choices on developing my current attitude. It seems that the most powerful influence my ancestry has had on my current attitude is in the way it promoted my own educational outcomes, as higher education has opened doors to new attitudes and knowledge that I would not have encountered otherwise. Thus, my ancestry has had a substantial impact on each part of my life. Even with very personal and individual outcomes, everything can be traced back to the lives of those ancestors who lived before us.